

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: August 29, 2021

Proper 17: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23: *Do your lips and lifestyles match up?*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirits.

It would be easy to laugh at all kinds of hypocrisy, if it weren't so prevalent today. Let me give you an example. During the worst months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mayor of a prominent city in Texas recorded a Facebook video urging residents of his town to avoid travel or large gatherings. "Stay home if you can," he declared. He sounded like a responsible leader of the people, until it came to light that he had recorded the Facebook video from his vacation spot in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. And he's only one example of numerous public officials who expected the general population to restrict their activities during the pandemic but did not live up to those same standards themselves.

We love to roll our eyes in disgust when we catch prominent people acting hypocritically. But we all have problems with moral and ethical consistency.

We all fail to meet our own standards sometimes. That's not an excuse, it's a reality. Somehow our hypocrisy radar fails us when we point it at ourselves. And it's an especially difficult issue for church leaders. Realistically, if you call yourself a Christian, a follower of Jesus, then you are a leader. Other people will watch you and draw conclusions about the character of God and the authenticity of your faith by how well your words and your actions match up to God's standards. It's a tough position to be in.

The Gospel from Mark today revolves around a question of "optics." The Pharisees and some teachers of the law noticed that Jesus and his disciples were not following the Jewish laws of ceremonial hand washing before they ate. Aha! The Pharisees thought they had caught Jesus breaking the religious rules. Surely this invalidated Jesus' authority as a religious leader! Instead of hanging his head in shame and slinking away, Jesus turned the tables on the Pharisees. He said, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules. You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.

You see my sisters and brothers. The great sin of the Pharisees was their hypocrisy. They loved the Law more than they loved the Lord and their neighbor. They cared more about keeping religious rules than knowing and honoring God. They said all the right things, but they weren't motivated by the heart of God. They set a standard for others that they did not live up to themselves. Mark's Gospel is a good example of Jesus' tough love. Hypocrisy is poisonous. It slowly kills trust and destroys relationships. And it kills the character of the hypocrite who is not honest enough or humble enough to admit his failure. And the Pharisees' hypocrisy is a doubly dangerous sword because it was driving people away from God and it was cheating the Pharisees out of an authentic relationship with God. Sadly, the Pharisees should have told people up-front, "We are not the God you are looking for! We care more about religious traditions than we do about the mind of God, the heart of God, the priorities of God."

I am afraid that is the reason the world has such a distorted view of Jesus Christ; it has judged Him by what others with His name have done. That hurts! Maybe we need some of Jesus' tough love this morning too. Because the sin of the Pharisees is our sin too. We say we follow Jesus, but all of us fall short of living as Jesus lived. Says Jesus, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." In other words, most of us are

satisfied to live according to the standards of our society. Yet Christ offers a higher standard.

A man came to meet me. With tears in his eyes. This man was a father and he was broken-hearted over his daughter and the choices she had made with her life. She had wandered far from her parents' faith. And the father had come to a painful realization. He said, "We raised her in Church, but we didn't raise her in Christ." There's a key to understanding our hypocrisy too. We can spend our whole life in church and never fall in love with God. We can listen to a lifetime of sermons. We can give to charities. We can memorize scripture. And, we can still miss the life-transforming joy of knowing God and sharing God's love with others. Remember, when the Pharisees asked Jesus to name the greatest commandment? Jesus didn't point to a rule or a religious observance or a church tradition. He pointed to a relationship. Jesus said, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments* (Matthew 22: 37-40).

My sisters and brothers in Christ, Jesus is saying, "God isn't pointing you toward the Law. The Law is pointing you toward God. Once you understand

God and submit your life to God, once you love God more than you love your own life, then you won't need the Law. Instead, your goodness will be replaced by Godliness."

When some of the great medieval cathedrals were built, like Notre Dame in Paris, most of the population of Europe was illiterate. Architects, sculptors and artists created these amazing cathedrals full of carvings and statues and stained-glass windows to tell the story of God through art. They assumed that the average citizen may never read a Bible, but they could "read" the story of God through the images in the church buildings. And that's still the best way to spread the message of Jesus. Most people in our society will never read the Bible or will only read it in part. Optics, my sisters and brothers, optics, you and I are the "living cathedrals" in our society. Others need to "read" the story of God in the way we live our lives. The best way to defeat the sin of hypocrisy is to move our testimony from our lips to our life. We cannot experience the abundant life Christ promises without living with the loving heart he exhibited.

The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Jesus by their lifestyle. It seems every day, I read about a priest removed from the

priesthood over allegations of child sexual abuse. Pedophile priests have stained the priesthood by their gross sins against children. This is an incredible hypocrisy, and of all us priests are stained by it. The sacred priesthood, good and faithful priests who keep their vows, are painted with the same brush. It causes us great sadness to all my brothers and sisters in the priesthood. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable. Can you blame them? (2X) So, how do we ensure that our lips and our lifestyle match up? How do we get an unbelieving world to believe?

Ghandi, the great Mahatma, the lawyer and social activist who lead the non-violent resistance campaign that freed India from British rule. Gandhi was asked this question, “How can Christianity make a stronger impact on your country?” Gandhi gave three key insights. First, he said that Christians need to live more like Jesus. Second, Gandhi said, that Christians must present the message of Jesus without adulteration, or cultural baggage. And finally, Gandhi said, Christians should emphasize love, that is the core message of the Christian faith.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, take a moment and think back over this last month. Examine your life in light of these three insights. Did you live like Jesus in your actions, your attitudes, your priorities and your motivations?

Did you present the message of Jesus in its purest form? Did you emphasize love in everything you said, thought and did? This isn't a quiz. This is your life. This is your calling. This is your legacy. How do you get an unbelieving world to believe? Always remember, our faith is simple. I implore you to keep your faith simple. Followers of Jesus are in love with God and lovers of people, or neighbor. It doesn't get any simpler than that.

Here is the challenge now and a challenge for a lifetime because that's how long it takes. So, let God take all of you. What do I mean by let God take all of you? Just, think about your life. Make up your mind that God would have all of there was of you. God can use your brains. God can use your charisma. God can use your energy. God can use your skills to share God's Son's message with the world. Those are useful, but they aren't essential. The only essential thing God needs from us is our commitment. Our total desire to love God and serve God with everything we have will make us more effective, authentic, persuasive witnesses than any amount of "proper" religious behavior.

We are hypocrites. Jesus knew we would be. But God loves us too much to leave us in our hypocrisy. Jesus knew that our half-hearted, insincere faith poisons our relationship with God and drives other people away from the life-

transforming truth of Jesus Christ. What's the source of our hypocrisy?

Honoring God with our lips when our hearts are far away from Him. What's

the cure for our hypocrisy? Loving God with all our heart, soul and mind, and

loving our neighbor as ourselves. That's the only way to move our testimony

from our lips to our life. How else do we get an unbelieving world to

believe? AMEN!